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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on issues surrounding international students in American community colleges. According to a survey conducted in 1996 by the American Association of Community Colleges, 80% of community colleges indicated having international students on campus, and this enrollment is increasing. The Chronicle of Higher Education states that twice as many international students are currently enrolled in community colleges today as were 10 years ago. There has been a large increase in students from East Asia, South Central Asia, and South East Asia, and moderate increases in students from Europe and Canada. The benefits to having these students on campus are numerous including: their presence promotes cultural awareness; and they can also be a source of revenue for the college. But the challenges faced by international students are also significant: some lack English preparation; experience a low level of interaction with domestic students; have difficulties with bureaucratic functions such as processing visas and securing housing in the surrounding area; and experience financial hardships. It is important for student services professionals to find ways to integrate international students with domestic students and the community at large. Cultural awareness workshops and personnel training should also take place on campuses to create a more welcoming environment. Contains 12 references. (Author/JA)

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Digest

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International Students at Community Colleges

By Anne Lamkin

International students have become a growing presence on community college campuses over the last few decades. As citizens of foreign countries who come to the U.S. to pursue a higher education, international students have unique needs and circumstances. As their presence increases, policies and student services especially designed for foreign students will be important priorities for college administrators and student services personnel. This digest will first discuss some of the enrollment trends in American community colleges with respect to international students. Benefits of having international students on campus will be addressed, as well as challenges international students face, both academically and socially. The final two sections of this digest discuss policy considerations for administrators and successful approaches to student services.

Trends in Enrollment

In a survey compiled in 1996 by the American Association of Community Colleges, 80% of community colleges indicated having international students on campus (Chase & Mahoney, 1996). The enrollment of international students in community colleges has increased substantially in recent years and is expected to continue to increase. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, twice as many international students are currently enrolled in community colleges as were 10 years ago (Desruisseaux, 1998). Chase and Mahoney (1996) reported that approximately 70% of community college personnel who oversee campus international education programs predicted moderate to rapid growth within their international education programs over the next five years.

Students from all over the globe enroll in American community colleges. Over the last ten years, there has been a large increase in students from East Asia, South Central Asia and South East Asia and moderate increases in students from Europe and Canada, but a decline in enrollment of students from the Middle East, Africa and Latin America (Ubadigbo, 1997). Continuing growth in enrollment of students from Asia is likely, as American community colleges offer students a means to expand the technical skills and knowledge needed in their native countries (Wong, 1992).

Benefits International Students Bring to Community Colleges

Perhaps the most commonly-cited benefit to having international students on campus is the idea that the presence of such students broadens the global and cultural perspectives of American students (Chase & Mahoney, 1996; Desruisseaux, 1998; Ewing, 1992; Gomez, 1987; Hatton, 1995; Segal, 1994). International students provide a learning opportunity for American students regarding global awareness, cultural sensitivity and diversity. Faculty can use international students as resources in the classroom for diverse perspectives, creating what has come to be known as the "international student-as-teacher" concept (Ewing, 1992, p. 38). Outside of the classroom, international students may offer cultural awareness and learning experiences to the college community through co-curricular activities, community events and host families.

In addition to cultural awareness, international students bring other benefits to community colleges. Non-resident tuition can be significant source of revenue in a time when resources for higher education are scarce (Desruisseaux, 1998; Hatton, 1995). Seventy-five percent of international students are supported from non-U.S. sources. Additionally, international programs and services generate jobs on campus that contribute to the local economy and job market (*http://www.opendoorsweb.org*).

Reasons for Attending an American Community College

American comm[illegible] colleges have increasingly attracted i[illegible]ational students for a variety of reasons. Desruisseaux (1998) suggested that the colleges offer a first-rate education in many fields that appeal to international students. These include intensive English language programs and training in specific skills, especially in technical areas. Smaller class sizes provide a greater level of individual attention for international students, while the emphasis on teaching, rather than research, at community colleges is also appealing (Ewing, 1992). American community colleges can provide educational opportunities that may not exist in students' native countries and their low cost attracts students who might not otherwise be able to afford to study in the United States. Ewing (1992, p. 37) noted, "nowhere else can a student who has had relatively little formal education enter so easily into a quality higher education experience."

Challenges Faced by International Students

It is important to understand the unique challenges international students face when pursuing higher education in the United States. A lack of culturally diverse communities, ignorance of foreign cultures, ethnocentrism, and cultural differences can make adjusting to life in the United States difficult. Challenges faced by international students include a lack of English preparation, a low level of interaction between international students and domestic students, difficulties with bureaucratic functions such as processing visas, securing housing in the surrounding area and financial hardships (Chase & Mahoney, 1996; Hochhauser, 1990; Mewhorter, et al., 1992; Pfaffenroth, 1997). These

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challenges need to be addressed so that a beneficial and welcoming learning environment is established.

Addressing Student Needs

To better serve international students, college administrators and student services personnel should establish policies that benefit these students. Policies regarding international student visas, admissions requirements such as TOEFL scores, financial assistance, and curriculum offered to international students are important considerations (Ewing, 1992). Student needs can be assessed by conducting surveys, talking informally with international students, attending professional conferences that focus on international students, including international students on policy-making bodies, and consulting with other institutions regarding policy arrangements (Gomez, 1987; Mewhorter, et al., 1992).

Pfaffenroth (1997) proposed a self-study model for community colleges, consisting of a series of questions that will help staff members determine the role international students play on campus. The questions address whether international students fit in with the goals and mission of the college, what types of financial assistance they should be awarded, whether or not these students should be actively recruited and the parameters through which community colleges should serve them. Pfaffernroth recommended that surveys of the international students already on campus be conducted to determine student needs, reasons for attendance, future plans, academic expectations and satisfaction with the college. Gomez (1987) suggested two additional ways of gathering information: consulting with other institutions on policy issues and including international student advisors in policy-making bodies.

One great challenge administrators face when implementing international education programs is a lack of funding. Outside funding for international student programs can be obtained through a variety of sources. The federal and state governments offer grants to fund programs in international education. Private foundations and local community organizations, such as churches and rotary clubs, somtimes offer support. Other sources of funds include foreign countries, private businesses, and NAFSA, the Association of International Educators (Hochhauser, 1990, Chase & Mahoney, 1996).

Making International Students Feel at Home

One of the most essential tasks of student services professionals regarding international students, yet often one of the most difficult, is finding ways to integrate international students with domestic students and the community at large. Programs should be designed that encourage domestic students to connect with international students so that cultural learning can take place on both ends (Segal, 1994). Another consideration for student services personnel should be providing cultural awareness or sensitivity workshops on campus. The "additional training of campus personnel to sensitize them to cultural differences and to any special needs of a particular national group" creates a more welcoming environment for international students (Tillman, 1990, p. 93).

There are also many ways to get international students involved with the community. Host families can provide a link between students and the community, and help familiarize students with American customs and culture (Hochhauser, 1990). Student services professionals can also plan programs that get international students involved in the community through volunteer work. One successful program is the International Mentors Program at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. International students at the community college were invited to act as mentors for ESL students at a local elementary school. The international students benefited by improving their English language abilities, gaining a better understanding of American culture and values and enhancing their self-esteem (*http://ccid.kirkwood.cc.ia.us/exemp/kccment.htm*).

Conclusion

Many benefits accrue when international students are on community college campuses. Their presence promotes opportunities to learn about other cultures, enhancing the educational experience for both international and domestic students. They can also be a source of revenue for the college. Successful international programs must address student needs through sound policy and effective student services. International student education is an increasingly important function of the community college, one that presents both challenges and opportunities.

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